

The Only True Honor

by Louise B. Ransom

It is not possible to deal with the subject of amnesty for 500,000 young Americans without first dealing with the subject of the Vietnam War.

The war and I have endured a lasting relationship since my oldest son, Mike, was killed near My Lai five years ago this spring. He arrived at his first assignment—a new 2nd Lieutenant infantry platoon leader—on the very day of the massacre, March 16, 1968. After that unspeakable atrocity committed by our own American troops, who could blame the embittered South Vietnamese farmer who set the mine that killed Mike such a few weeks later?

Had he been alive in November, 1968, he would have rejoiced that Lyndon Johnson had been deposed. He once wrote: "I did hear Johnson's speech of de-escalation and non-candidacy and thought it the best of his career. It created in me a great sense of hope that this obscenity over here would end shortly." How he would have welcomed the new President "with his shining promises to end the war and bring us together.

But where are we now, five long years later? We have a cease-fire and "peace with honor," but we have not ceased firing, people are still dying, and honor is nowhere to be found.

We can look back in horror and shame that the most advanced technological nation in the world was virtually annihilating—in the name of freedom—several primitive agricultural countries to preserve the thrones of such leaders as Nguyen Van Thieu and Lon Nol. The ultimate anguish for me is that my own son lost his life in the perpetration of such shame.

And the shame grows as the perfidy of our leaders is revealed through the deceptions detailed in the Pentagon Papers and the disillusioning reality of Watergate. This painful knowledge clarifies for me the action of those men who would not permit their bodies to be used, as Mike's was, to continue the madness. Their "crime"? They refused to obey leaders whom they could neither believe nor trust.

I share bitter tears with all of those who are victims of this war, particularly the 57,000 mothers whose sons will never return. We mothers weep also for the thousands of our sons who are maimed for life, wounded in body and spirit. There are, of course, not enough tears in the whole world for the mothers in Indochina. Creating half a million more war victims because of intransigence to amnesty is unbearable to contemplate.

The deepest tragedy for me, too deep for tears, comes from despair over what we have become as a nation. What are our true values? What does it mean when our heroes are professional warriors, when the bulk of our treasure is spent for instruments of death rather than to improve the quality of life, when the leaders we choose to govern us value power above people?

How are we parents, conscious of our American heritage—founded in dissent and dedicated to freedom—to raise our children to be proud of their country in such a climate? Have we not placed in jeopardy the very birthright of their whole generation to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

How can I help my five remaining sons to find some positive meaning in the death of their brother?

My husband and I have long faced the difficult truth that there was no gain for this country from our son's death. His life was wasted by his own government and nothing we do can alter that.

But the President, in an effort to find value where there is none, has said: "Let us not dishonor those who served their

country by granting amnesty to those who deserted America." In other words, if amnesty is not granted, the death becomes honorable. I must disagree.

The only way we can dishonor those who died is to learn nothing from them—to repeat the past and continue our present course of action.

We are a divided, corrupted, and bloodstained nation. A universal and unconditional amnesty for men who refused to fight in the war—the ghastly symbol of all that is wrong—might just be the very element that could help to heal us.

At the very least, it could reconcile parents and sons. It could also restore our pride in ourselves as a compassionate people. It could revive our vision of devotion to social justice and renew our self-confidence by recognizing freedom of conscience for all.

Let us, therefore, join hands,—rich and poor, black and white, parents and children—united in our faith in the healing power of amnesty, and determined to achieve it.

If somehow all the sorrow, and all the tears, and the killing can help us to become a better people, perhaps then, and only then, can we say that these deaths—these sacrifices—have been redeemed and will have had a positive meaning for us as Americans—the only true honor.

The young dead soldiers do
not speak.
Nevertheless, they are heard
in the still houses: who has
not heard them?
They have a silence that speaks
for them at night and when
the clock counts.
They say: We were young. We
have died. Remember us.
They say: We have done what
we could but until it is
finished it is not done.
They say: We have given our
lives but until it is finished
no one can know what our
lives gave.
They say: Our deaths are not
ours; they are yours, they
will mean what you make
them.
They say: Whether our lives
and our deaths were for
peace and a new hope or for
nothing we cannot say; it is
you who must say this.
They say: We leave you our
deaths. Give them their
meaning.
We were young, they say. We
have died. Remember us.

—Archibald MacLeish